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ABSTRACT

Curriculum development in the United States has been based on the assumption that white middle-class values should serve as the standard for all of American society, but there is a need for courses in Afro-American communication which depart from traditional standards and categories of speech communication curricula. They should reflect concern for: (1) discourse from non-Afro-Americans that affects Afro-Americans, (2) all the variables that affect the communication process, and (3) the social, economic, and political contexts in which communication occurs. This requires an interdisciplinary, complementary approach that accepts and utilizes as equally important the sensuous, intuitive, and intellectual processes in human communication. The concept of cultural relativity, which assumes that all cultures are equally valid, forms a sound basis for studying Afro-American communication, particularly in the areas of Black English, Afro-American rhetoric, and the cross-cultural influence of mass media. (Outlines for four sequential courses are included.) (RN)

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TEACHING AFROAMERICAN COMMUNICATION

by

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August, 1972

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The American educational system has blatantly failed to recognize the pluralistic nature of its society. Through the years, curriculum development has been based upon the assumption that the interests of the white middle-class culture should constitute the norm for all micro-cultures within American society. However, over the past few years colleges, universities, and public schools have been faced with demands to make their curricula more "relevant" to all students. Specifically, teachers have been asked to develop courses which would examine the sociological, economical, political, and psychological milieu of the macro-culture (larger society), and its effect on the micro-cultures (small societies), as well as examine the micro-culture's own cultural network systems and life styles. Such micro-cultures are represented by Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asians, Afroamericans, and others.

Many Speech Communication teachers have recognized the role of communication in the understanding of self and in developing mutual understanding among peoples. Additionally, they have noted the lack of mutual understanding between whites and Afroamericans, and consequently, they have perceived a need to study Afroamerican Communication. However, for many teachers there is still a wide gap between the recognition of the need and the actual offering of courses in Afroamerican Communication.

In far too many instances, tremendous effort has been required in order to get faculty members and administrators to acknowledge the need for courses in Afroamerican Communication. In situations where

faculty and administrators have accepted the need and developed new courses, the "new" courses in Afroamerican Communication are more apt to be simply a change in title, the integration of some Afroamerican material into existing courses, or the examination of Afroamerican Communication from a traditional frame of reference. For example, the course that is sometimes labeled "Black Rhetoric" often turns out to be nothing more than the use of classical, rhetorical methods for analyzing Afroamerican rhetorical figures. Again, some people have used what we believe to be misleading titles such as "Sociolinguistics" and "Ghetto Language" to describe courses which focus on the linguistic habits of Afroamericans. Among the many other factors which have hampered systematic curriculum development in Afroamerican Communication are:

1. Lack of professional agreement on course objectives
2. Lack of definition of the parameters of Afroamerican Communication
3. Lack of available, qualified teachers
4. Lack of knowledge of, and access to, appropriate reading, audio, and visual materials
5. Problems stemming from teacher and student attitudes given the concern for ethnicity
6. Inconsistent definitions of key concepts such as "Afroamerican" and "Black"

Although all of the above factors impede systematic curriculum development in Afroamerican Communication, the authors believe that such curriculum

development has been fundamentally hampered by the failure to develop an appropriate curriculum philosophy. Specifically, it is maintained that the traditional ways of subdividing Speech Communication into Speech Pathology and Audiology, Rhetoric and Public Address, Theatre, and Communications is antithetical to developing courses in Afroamerican Communication. Hence, a significant portion of this article will be devoted to describing a curriculum philosophy for teaching Afroamerican Communication.

All of the authors have developed, and taught courses in Afroamerican Communication at the University of Pittsburgh. These courses have been offered to students of different ethnic backgrounds, and have been offered for more than one semester. The authors believe that they have significant experiential and theoretical information on curriculum development to offer the readers. This article is written specifically for the purpose of aiding teachers who are interested in developing and teaching courses in Afroamerican Communication. The term Afro-American is preferred by the authors and will be used throughout this article for it is held that this term above all others meets the criteria "...for the formal designation of a people, namely clear and obvious identification with past land, history and culture."[1] More specifically, Afroamerican calls attention to the specific interaction of Africans and Europeans in America. Afroamerican is a term that takes into account African heritage, and the term also calls attention to the unique American experience as opposed to the African in the Caribbean, South America,

or elsewhere.

When we speak of communication, we have reference to all of the concerns subsumed under the headings of language, rhetoric, communication, theatre, mass media, dance, folklore, music and literature. Since Afroamerican is used to refer to American citizens of African descent, Afroamerican Communication refers to all of the oral, written, and non-verbal discourse of Afroamericans. While this definition draws attention to discourse and symbolic processes via Afroamerican expression, there is also a concern for (1) discourse from non-Afroamericans that affects Afroamericans, (2) all of the potential variables which can affect the communication process, and (3) the social, economical, political milieu in which the discourse occurs.

Because of the nature and complexity of Afroamerican Communication, the authors believe there is a need for an interdisciplinary approach to Afroamerican Communication which reflects complementarity. Complementarity entails an analytic approach that combines the sensuous and intuitive with the intellectual.[2] Complementarity does not entail reducing complexities via categories, and it does not entail separating the subjective realm of experience from scientific endeavors. On the other hand, traditional scientific approaches have attempted to reduce complexity by categorizing and compartmentalizing information. This tendency to reduction of environmental stimuli is not exclusively applied to academia and its various disciplines. Benjamin Whorf has suggested

that the linguistic labels and the grammars of each culture are an index to how that culture perceives and organizes its world.[3] The language system allows the human nervous system, which is only capable of handling a finite number of stimuli, to cope with an infinite number of stimuli in the world by reducing through categorization the numerous stimuli in the universe. It is this same "tendency to reduction of stimuli" that has precipitated the present compartmentalization of academia. It must be noted too that the "scientific revolution", with its emphasis on isolating and describing phenomena, has played a significant role in projecting parsimonious categorization.

Teachers as well as others have become so enmeshed in the scientific method that all too often they fail to see that what is viewed as scientific effort to control variables and describe phenomena may not be reflective of that phenomena in nature. In fact, what is observed may reflect more the nature of the laboratory than nature itself. For example, some classical rhetoricians accept the principles of men such as Aristotle, Plato, and Quintiallian as the most applicable means of analyzing spoken discourse. An effective speaker is defined then as one who "appropriately" uses the strategies and tactics outlined by these men. In so doing, such analysts eschew the whole notion of "cultural relativity" as the classical model for them transcends culture, history, and time. Using the Aristotelian model, there is a tendency to label "ineffective" speeches which do not fit their models, without reference to cultural relevance. Thus,

the classical rhetorician, like the broadway critics who labeled Melvin Van Peebles' play, "Ain't Suppose to Die a Natural Death," "boring, and extremely repetitive," distort reality by failing to recognize "cultural relativity" and sensuous complementarity. For just as Afroamericans have truly enjoyed Van Peebles' play and have considered it effective because it expresses their culture, they are sure to relate to Afroamerican orators in a similar fashion. In essence, some classical rhetoricians have succeeded in putting Esmiralda's foot into Cinderella's shoe and are not at all perturbed by the anguish which is caused by the misfit. That essence which makes the difference between what Afroamericans label "good" in Afroamerican communication and whites label at the same time "bad or poor" is probably attributable to the differences in the expression of the sensuous and intuitive aspects of the two cultures.

Murray, Phillips and Truby have stated that "...The obvious separation of Psychology and Sociology or of English and Speech encourages a kind of academic xenophobia, where disciplines contend rather than cooperate in the search for answers."[4] If one is to successfully study Afroamerican Communication, then one must avoid the trap of falling into (1) a compartmentalized study, (2) an ethnocentric study, and (3) an ethnic, isolationist study. With one's blinders removed, one is inclined to agree with Murray, et al when they write that "...most of society's serious issues do not permit functional separation of the political, economic and sociological issues."[5] The authors would go one step further and

suggest that the study of communication, in and of itself, is the study of a moral, socio-economic, and political issue. Moral, socio-economic, and political issues are inextricably bound to all that is encompassed in Afroamerican Communication. Consequently, an approach which is geared exclusively from one academic perspective and which does not reflect complementarity will necessarily produce an incomplete, if not distorted, picture of a given Afroamerican phenomenon.

In short, what is being offered to speech teachers as a method for circumventing meaningless dichotomizing of Afroamerican Communication is an interdisciplinary approach with a focus on complementarity. The former term suggests an approach whereby various disciplines are combined to achieve a more accurate description of nature or to secure answers. The latter, complementarity, "...offers a method of including both sensuous and intellectual knowledge of nature in a common frame of reference."[6] Complementarity is not a mere combination of existing viewpoints, but rather it is a process by which esthetic and intuitive observations contribute "...equally to the description of nature that science long ago took for its province."[7] Therefore, an interdisciplinary approach to Afroamerican Communication which focuses on complementarity will utilize and accept as equally important the esthetic, sensuous information which relates to the subject matter as well as emphasize a combination of disciplines. For example, if one were to study a poem by Don Lee, he would, of necessity, need to view that poem in a historical, psychological, cultural, socio-economic, and political context. The message of the

poem is translatable only within that context. This particular Afroamerican poet writes to teach. Therefore, style and form are means to an end and not an end in themselves as they are to some extent in European poetry. In addition, much Afroamerican poetry is written to be heard. Consequently, only by reading such poetry aloud does one capture the sensuous and intuitive essence which is so vital to its interpretation. Moreover, not every person who fancies himself a reader of poetry can read Afroamerican poetry as written by these new bards.

Many Afroamerican poets have recorded their own poetry in order to keep the sensuous and intuitive elements bound to their message. In some instances it may be necessary to tape record an Afroamerican who can generate, in his rendition of the poem, the sensuous, intuitive elements intended by the writer. Such a recording should be used when discussing Afroamerican poetry. What is being discussed here can be further clarified by an excerpt from a poem by Don Lee entitled, "a poem to complement other poems." It is written in the following form:

> change nigger change
> no the realenemy
> change: is u is or is u ain't. change. now now change. for
> the better change
> read a change. live a change. read a black poem
> change. be the realpeople.
> change. blackpoems. will change.[8]

The message of this poem focuses on change as a medium for getting to know "self" and the poem serves as a teacher in the process of one's becoming knowledgeable about self. However, the message is the more

effective when it is heard. Upon hearing the poem, one is able to perceive that the rhythmic quality of the poem reflects a basic rhythm which runs throughout Afroamerican life style, i.e. Afroamerican church music, walking, dancing, etc. To simply apply traditional techniques of poetic analysis is to distort the poet's intent, since the poet strives to emphasize content by blending the sensuous and the intellectual.

Whether we talk about "Black English," "Black Rhetoric," "Black Radio," or any other form of Afroamerican Communication, the implications for how we are to view it are the same. The authors have found that it is extremely necessary initially to explore the concepts of culture and cultural relativity when introducing courses in Afroamerican Communication. Understanding culture and cultural relativity is important to the teaching of Afroamerican Communication because the way one communicates is culturally determined. The theory of cultural relativity holds that all cultures are equally valid -- that there are neither superior nor subordinate cultures. Once the notion of cultural relativity is established, the teacher has a sound basis for studying the various aspects of Afroamerican Communication. Thus, it becomes apparent that all of the behaviors of a given culture must be viewed in light of that culture. It becomes necessary for students and teachers alike to put aside ethnocentric ideas when studying other cultures and their ways of believing and behaving if they are to gain understanding. Subsequent to this understanding of cultural relativity, one may wish to develop a historical background for understanding the specific Afroamerican communication

behavior being studied. Three examples should suffice to explicate this view. The first is the study of Black English. Black English (B. E.) is defined here to mean the language spoken by Afroamericans in the United States.

One cannot effectively study Black English without knowing something about the history of its development, its status as a language or a dialect, the socio-economic, political, and moral issues surrounding it as a language, and the cultural uses that Afroamericans make of their language systems. When the focus is on understanding B. E., some additional areas of concern are as follows: (1) theories on the origins of language, (2) distinguishing languages and dialects, (3) theories of language acquisition, (4) the linguistic approach to the study of language, (5) the difference versus the deficit theory of B. E. and the "legitimacy" of linguistic codes, (6) folklore and its relationship to B. E. and culture, (7) the usage of B. E. in the schools and the educational implications thereof, and (8) Black Nonverbal Communication. Cultural influence should be emphasized throughout discussions on Black Language so that students remain aware of the effect of one's culture on all forms of an individual's behavior.

In the above B. E. illustration, the authors do not claim to include all relevant factors necessary to understanding Black English. Space does not permit such an undertaking. We have simply tried to give an indication of some of the pertinent issues in analyzing and understanding a particular phenomena via an interdisciplinary approach. It

should also be noted that complementarity is essential to understanding B.E. since the suprasegmentals of language (intonation, stress, juncture) often play a more significant role in conveying messages in B.E. than they do in Standard English (S.E.). In addition, there are culturally defined contexts in which specific message forms occur that are predicated on complementarity. For example, Jack L. Daniel in his study of Afroamerican Proverbial Usage has disclosed that proverbs have served as a socializing force in the Afroamerican home to the extent that it is important that one knows not only the meaning of the proverb, but also one must know with "whom," "where," and "when" to use the proverb.[9] The next example describes how an interdisciplinary approach which reflects complementarity can be used in studying Afroamerican rhetoric.

It is interesting to note that much of the last decade has been spent in controversy over the rightful heirs of study in rhetoric since many contemporary rhetoricians believe persons need not die to be worthy of study. Those who are participating in the struggle for change are seeking to redefine the parameters of rhetorical inquiry. The Afroamerican rhetorician has often joined this struggle for contemporary "relevance." The Afroamerican rhetorician's efforts to redefine are also redolent of his efforts to redefine his very existence and to legitimize his reality as he perceives it to be. This legitimization of self has and continues to evolve through sensuous and intellectual media of exploration. For example, in the intellectual arena "revolutionary rhetoric" has been studied as a major concern of Afroamerican rhetoric, and hence concepts

such as "revolution," "self concept," "black consciousness," "Black power," and the "power to define" just to name a few, are reviewed in depth. We suggest that such intellectual investigations should also include the historical origins and development of these terms, and the social, economical, political contexts that help shape belief in and advocacy of these concepts as they are defined by Afroamericans. For example, "rhetoric" may be viewed as a specific use of language, but the meaning of the word rhetoric itself changes when viewed from the Afroamerican perspective. Often Afroamericans view the word "rhetoric" as a synonym for "rapping," "bullshit," "philosophizing," "tripping out," "fantasy," etc. The teacher should not simply establish an operational definition of rhetoric and ignore the definitions commonly accepted in the Afroamerican community. One cannot fully understand a concept like "revolution" without a systematic study of the word and the people. One also needs to understand the nature of the specific social change called for by Afroamericans, and the implications of these changes for the future state of the world.

On the sensuous level, students of Afroamerican rhetoric should be required to attend Afroamerican rallies, socials, and churches in order to experience an Afroamerican speech or sermon, thereby exposing them to the sensuous aspects of the rhetoric. After attending and experiencing the student will probably not be content to do a type-token ratio of an Afroamerican sermon.

The third example of our approach to Afroamerican Communication can be demonstrated by focusing on mass media. The starting point for studying the mass media in Afroamerican Communication ought to be the study of how the mass media can influence Afroamerican community development. This view is held for at least two reasons. First of all, it is known that the mass media can facilitate national development in various ways. As Wilbur Schramm has pointed out "...all countries, new or old, industrialized or not, highly developed or underdeveloped are properly concerned with the development of their communication systems."[10] Secondly, it is known that the Afroamerican community is highly undeveloped and is not politically, socially and economically integrated, both of which are conditions that the mass media can play a functional role in remedying. Once the effects of mass media on national development has been analyzed, the study of Afroamerican mass media can proceed by helping the students gain an understanding of the potential and actual influence of the mass media on the lives of people. The student should know the essential impact that the mass media has had on civilization as man moved from oral-auditory media, to writing, to the radio, to television, to satellites, and cable television. Simultaneously, one should develop a concept of political power and make comparisons between the impact of the mass media and the concept of political power. From a historical, political, economic analysis of the mass media, one needs to understand how the kinds and uses of the mass media differ from culture to culture. One should consider the historical-cultural-

political significance of the African oral tradition, dance, music, and talking drum. Special attention could be paid to the cultural determinants of the kind of messages that are sent on a particular medium in Africa.

From a knowledge of how the mass media can be used as instruments for political power, the significance of white racism and white control of the mass media in America can be discussed. Such a discussion can move from slanting, distorting, and general bias in the press to the current inadequate racial hiring patterns of the mass media owners. While the psychological impact of Tarzan can be discussed, profitable time could also be spent on the economical significance of Motown and Atlantic Recording Companies in relationship to the Temptations and Aretha Franklin.

The overall thrust of the study of mass media is to study the actual and potential impact of the mass media on civilization. Afroamerican mass media should be discussed in terms of how it has, does, does not, and can facilitate Afroamerican community development. As one studies all the aforementioned aspects of the media, he may achieve complementarity via intra and extra class presentations. For example, he may wish to have students perform classroom observations in an inner city school and in a suburban school as well as survey the general condition of the schools. Students might observe and evaluate local Afroamerican mass media. Students might also attend Afroamerican theatre and musical performances in order to prepare for a discussion of what is "good" or "bad" music, dance, and theatre. Certainly one needs to sense the

new Black esthetic as well as categorize it.

At this point we have attempted to outline an interdisciplinary approach to Afroamerican Communication that focuses on complementarity. Since our general interest is in curriculum development, we would also like to point to some additional barriers to the teaching of Afroamerican Communication.

The teacher-pupil interaction is partially predicated on the attitudes of the teacher and pupils involved. Specifically, the attitudes brought to the classroom by the teacher and students can set the tone for the quality of the classroom activities. Teachers must bring to the classroom not only a broad knowledge of the subject matter, but also a sense of purpose and the self-confidence that they can achieve their goals. Although this may apply to all classes, the Afroamerican Communication classroom presents a unique situation.

The Afroamerican Communication classroom's "uniqueness" is a result of its social origin, research status, and formal development. The field of Afroamerican Communication is the outgrowth of heat and confrontation between Black students and faculty, and white faculty and administrators. Many Afroamericans were and still are involved in a process of inquiry which would lead to the development of a new reality for Afroamericans. Such people sought to establish that they too had a culture, language, history, and heritage of which to be proud. The coming of the call for self-help, racial solidarity, and racial pride served as a catalyst for Afroamerican students to want to study self. At the same

time, we must keep in mind that Afroamerican Communication did not always exist as a discipline even though a body of literature was available. Meanwhile, words such as "minority group," "ghetto people," etc. caused persons to believe that certain persons and issues weren't worth studying. In short, one did not have an orderly, scientifically developed area of study to work with in hopes of branching off into specific areas of concern.

It is often said by some Afroamericans that white students do not understand the dynamics of the relationships between self, others, and institutions due to the fact that they are part of the system, and therefore, unconsciously move in the direction of the status quo. In any event, many white teachers and students have lived in a white vacuum, and are unaware of the life experiences of Afroamericans except for what they have and have not read in books. Put another way, many white teachers and students have little understanding of "the other America." Afroamerican students, on the other hand, are said to be actively involved in the struggle for self preservation and liberation. Since Afroamerican students have experienced institutional racism, they seek to understand the educational, social, political, economic, and religious implications of that which they study. Consequently, these differences make for different expectations with regards to what a course in Afroamerican Communication ought to be about. On the one hand there are people who seek "scientific," basic, "academic," understandings, and on the other hand there are people who seek information which can be used for personal and group change. In addition to these discrepant expectations we have

the following general attitudes.

1. Afroamerican and white students often hold teacher competence suspect.

2. Students often concern themselves with "getting over" as opposed to serious study.

3. Students are overly defensive. Whites feel they must defend "the superiority of their race." Afroamericans feel they must defend "their superiority of knowledge of subject matter" and therefore attack "white superiority."

4. Afroamerican and white students project their own inferiority feelings on to the teacher.

5. Afroamerican and white students label the course "inferior" because it is about Afroamericans.

6. Teachers and students regardless of color role-play so as to present the "model" he or she believes the teacher/students want to see, i.e. "the militant," "the liberal."

7. Some Afroamerican and white teachers allow students to have a "free-for-all." The teacher allows the sensuous to override the intellectual aspects of the course content -- "my how beautiful it is."

8. Afroamericans and whites unnecessarily go through name-calling rituals to arouse the emotions of others; i.e. overuse of words such as "honkies," "nigger," "the beast."

9. Afroamerican and white students challenge points being made by requesting statistics to the point of absurdity.

10. White students are viewed as invaders and exploiters, and therefore communication is restricted. There is a genuine distrust of whites in the class by Afroamericans.

11. Afroamerican students tend to label anything that is representative (symbolic) of white society as bad, and desire, therefore, to eschew it. (tests, class attendance, research papers, etc.).

All of the above attitudes and behaviors have been experienced by the authors. While we do not have solutions to offer in this article, we believe that all of the above attitudes and behaviors need to be in the minds of those who seek to develop courses in Afroamerican Communication. The final section of this paper will be addressed to outlining four sequential courses in Afroamerican Communication.

The following courses are designed for the purposes of introducing students to the discipline of Afroamerican Communication, developing their awareness of research needs, and in general to serve as preparation for advanced graduate study. The courses are thus designed to begin with a survey of the field, followed by successive in depth treatments of specific subjects.

AFROAMERICAN COMMUNICATION I: A SURVEY

Objectives

1. To explain the following relationships
   - A. Language and Culture
   - B. Language and Politics
   - C. Language and Economics
2. To define an "interdisciplinary approach" to the study of Speech Communication and establish the rationale for studying Afroamerican Communication from an interdisciplinary point of view.
3. To outline the parameters of Afroamerican Communication and to establish the social, political, economical significance of studying various issues.

I. Language, Culture, and Politics

- A. The nature of social perception

B. The arbitrary nature of symbols
C. Impact of language on thought and action
D. Political control of the symbolic process

1. The language of the colonizer versus the language of the colonized.
2. Language and social acceptability

II. An Interdisciplinary Approach

A. Objectivity and Subjectivity
B. Complementarity
C. Interdisciplinary
D. The Blind men and the Elephant, and the case of the message centered communication scientist.

III. The Field of Afroamerican Communication

A. Afroamerican linguistic habits, Rhetoric, and Interpersonal Communication

1. History
2. Current status
3. Social-psychological-economical significance

B. White Control of the American Mass Media

1. Political-Economical consequences
2. Social-Psychological consequences

C. Afroamerican Mass Media

1. Press, Radio, and Television
2. Music, Dance, and Theatre

AFROAMERICAN COMMUNICATION II: LANGUAGE, RHETORIC, COMMUNICATION

Objectives

1. To show how the American political-social-economical milieu affects Afroamerican language, rhetoric and communication

2. To outline and discuss specific issues within the areas of language, rhetoric and communication and in so doing specify the field of study

3. To discuss the status of research in Afroamerican language, rhetoric and communication

4. To outline and discuss priorities for investigation in the areas of Afroamerican language, rhetoric, and communication

I. Historical Perspective

A. African origins, continuity, and survivals in Afroamerican language, rhetoric, and communication

B. The impact of European-African interaction in America on Afroamerican language, rhetoric, and communication

II. Social-Political-Economical Aspects of Afroamerican Language, Rhetoric, and Communication

A. Afroamerican - white communication

B. Afroamerican rhetorical figures

C. Ethnographic analyses of Afroamerican Communication Patterns

D. Nonverbal aspects of Afroamerican Communication

E. Afroamerican linguistic habits

F. Afroamerican folklore

III. Research and Development

A. Communication Research for Afroamerican Community Development

B. Research Priorities and Related Rationale

AFROAMERICAN COMMUNICATION III: MASS MEDIA

Objectives

1. To develop an understanding of how the mass media can facilitate community development

2. To outline and discuss specific issues within the areas of Afroamerican dance, music, theatre, radio, television, newspapers, and literature

3. To discuss the status of research in the above areas of Afroamerican Communication

I. Mass Media and Afroamerican Community Development

II. Historical Perspective

A. African origins, continuity, and survivals in Afroamerican Mass Media

B. The impact of European-African interaction in America on Afroamerican Mass Media

III. Social-Political-Economical Aspects of Afroamerican Mass Media

A. Newspapers, radio, and television

B. Music

C. Dance

D. Theatre

IV. Research and Development

AFROAMERICAN COMMUNICATION IV: A SEMINAR

This is to be a seminar for in depth study of a particular aspect of Afroamerican Communication. In addition to developing a thorough understanding of existing research in the area, the student is to conduct the equivalent of a pilot study in a specified area.

FOOTNOTES

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All of the above attitudes and behaviors have been experienced by the authors. While we do not have solutions to offer in this article, we believe that all of the above attitudes and behaviors need to be considered by student and teacher alike as those who seek to develop courses in Afroamerican Communication.